

C.W. “BILL” TRUESDALE

C.W. “Bill” Truesdale was the founder and longtime editor of New Rivers Press, Minnesota’s oldest nonprofit publisher. Known as a risk-taker, he helped to launch scores of previously-unknown literary authors such as poet Charles Simic and Minnesotans David Haynes and Charles Baxter. Truesdale wrote the following essay at the celebration of New Rivers Press’s thirtieth anniversary. This essay first appeared in The Talking of Hands (1998).

New Rivers Press: A History (1968-98)

Those of us who began publishing in the small press literary field in the sixties were likely to be naïve, sometimes idealistic, often governed by vanity, and full of illusions about what we were setting out to accomplish.

New Rivers Press was no exception. Even though I was nearly forty years old when I started it in Nyack, New York, in February 1968, it was a wholly new and exhilarating experience for me. I had, by then, been a full-time college professor for more than thirteen years, had a PhD in English and Comparative Literature (which I received from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1956), was married and had three children, and had three books of my own poetry published (the first in Mexico City, the second in Denver, and the third in New York City). The only previous experience I’d had with any small press was with El Corno Emplumado, run by Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón in Mexico City (my first publishers). The fact that I was by then a very active and committed poet made me much like almost all of my compatriots in the small press field. And like most of them, too, I was strongly opposed to the Vietnam War (though my older brother, John, served there as a major in the Green Berets in 1965-66). Also like most of them, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I didn’t even know in the beginning that there were hundreds of other small presses and literary magazines being thrown together all over America at that time—that, indeed, a kind of Renaissance was taking place in this country, a literary explosion that lasted well into the seventies.

Unlike many small press publishers in the sixties, I did not start my own press for any political reason, even though most of the books I was to publish over the next dozen or so years had a strong political

basis. Primarily, I was motivated by two things: 1) My background was in the centuries-long practice of great literature in England. As a teacher my specialty had been, of all unlikely things, medieval literature—Chaucer, Langland, the Pearl Poet, and the medieval romance—but I was well-acquainted with other major periods and authors as well. 2) I'd had one hell of a time getting my own first book published. I was thirty-seven years old when my first book came out, and I wanted to make it just a little bit easier for other first book authors to get their poetry published, a motivation that still characterizes the mission of New Rivers Press.

Starting New Rivers was not something I set out deliberately to do. Ever since I'd been in Mexico two years before and had observed El Corno Emplumado, I had, to be sure, dreamed of starting a similar, though less political, press in the United States. After I left full-time teaching in the spring of 1967, I did talk a lot about something like that, but I didn't do anything about it—not until my late ex-brother-in-law, Bill Chaffee (an architect who worked for I.M. Pei in New York City), bought a farm near Southfield, Massachusetts, in late 1967. Bill told me there was an old letterpress sitting in a shed near his new old house and that I could certainly have it if I really wanted to put my feet where my mouth had been for so long. Otherwise, he was just going to have to get rid of it. At that time, I knew nothing about printing, had never heard of letterpresses or offset lithography, and had certainly never even thought about actually getting involved in printing.

But, being my father's son, I swallowed that particular hook. I went up to Southfield to look over the situation and what I saw was an old-fashioned Chandler & Price letterpress that had not been used for years. George, the son of the previous owners of the place (from whom he had inherited the farm as well as this old monster of a machine), told me all about what it had been used for. The shed where it was located had been a Christmas card factory of sorts. The cards themselves had been silkscreened and the press had been used to print Christmas sentiments inside the folded-over cards.

The press itself was something of a mess. The basic mechanism—a huge flywheel that closed the two gigantic maws like a clamshell—was intact, there were a couple of chases (for holding the handset type in place), but the inking mechanism had been disconnected and scattered all over the place, and the suction cups that lifted the paper were in pathetic shape. But George said I would find it a breeze to print. He showed me the instruction book that came with the press, and it seemed reasonable and simple enough that I could master printing in no time flat. I left Massachusetts a little drunk (from exhilaration, yes,

and also from bourbon) and resolved to go up there in a month or two and start the actual printing of what became the first three New Rivers books. I knew myself well enough, however, to figure out that I had no intention of setting type by hand.

I soon found a printer in West Nyack (about ten miles from where I lived) who had an old linotype machine and—more importantly—a guy named Jim who knew how to use it. He was fairly young for a profession that was rapidly disappearing. I had him set the first two books on that machine and bought what I hoped would be enough paper to start printing. All of which—the lead slugs, which must have weighed a thousand pounds, for two small books, as well as the boxes of very expensive and rather elegant stock, and the clothes and other stuff I would need—I loaded up in my Volvo.

When I got to Southfield and found my way back to the farm, not only George but that Chandler & Price instruction manual had disappeared. I really knew nothing at all about printing and was thus faced with what I can only call a true existential experience. The nearest help was miles and miles away, and, besides, I was just too crazy with pride to admit I needed help.

February in Massachusetts is not like February in Minnesota but it was certainly cold enough. Cold enough for snowmobiles (a relatively new invention at that time) to roar past on those country and very much unplowed roads. The house, which Bill and Connie Chaffee had completely remodeled, was certainly warm enough, but that shed was heated by a small, inefficient oil heater. It took an hour or more to heat up the place—and the printing ink, which I rapidly discovered had an aversion to cold weather.

Heat—or the lack of it—turned out to be the least of my problems. I found out almost immediately that there was no way I could get the automatic inking device on the press to work (I couldn't even figure out how to put it together). This meant I had to hand ink the press, which, in turn, meant that every page I managed to print came out different from all the others, so that the inking throughout both of those two books, especially the first one, was inconsistent and, frankly, a total mess. Since the press was too small to print more than two pages at a time, this inconsistency became very noticeable.

Furthermore, I could never get the feeding device to work properly and had to hand feed each sheet of stock, which meant sticking my right hand between those two great maws before they could close and mangle it. It also took me a long time to figure out how to make each lead slug in the chase come out clearly. After trial and error, I discovered that using little strips of paper underneath some of the slugs did the job well enough. What this meant was that I

had to spend at least fifteen or twenty minutes preparing every two pages in the whole book. This wasn't a problem with the first two books because they were no more than twenty-five pages in length. But it became a real hassle with the third book (Al Greenberg's *The Metaphysical Giraffe*), because it was somewhere around seventy pages in length.

The third New Rivers book presented yet another problem. Lead printing slugs are about four inches wide. Al's lines were often no more than an inch to an inch and a half in width. When I tried to print this book, I found that the ends of each slug marked the page with blobs of ink. The only way I could correct this problem was to trim down the ends of each slug with a power saw (which, fortunately, that shed possessed). This certainly corrected the problem of the slugs, but it also meant, since it was now very warm in the shed, that I sprayed my left arm with lead pellets and nicked it constantly. It's a wonder I didn't come down with a bad case of lead-poisoning! It took me most of the summer just to print that third book.

The Metaphysical Giraffe was the very last book I printed in Massachusetts. Not only was I spending an enormous amount of time up there, but I also found that it was costing me far more than I had imagined, even just for the stock alone. I was spending at least three times as much for that paper as an ordinary printer would because such a printer buys it in huge quantities and hence gets a large discount. It would be much cheaper to have New Rivers books printed by offset lithography even if I hadn't been spending an inordinate amount of precious time doing the actual printing. I could spend far less time and money bringing out more and more books each year, and I could do the things like editing and writing that I had much more talent for.

Still, I did learn a great deal about printing—the hard way—a knowledge that makes me appreciate printing technology all that much more. Besides, I have a real respect for people doing physical things with their hands. I've never liked having people do things for me—perhaps that's kind of a reverse snobbism on my part. Even in my first marriage (when we had plenty of money), I did most of the things on our farm (near Lexington, Virginia) that had to be done—brushhogging the pastures, putting in fields of alfalfa, doing most of the carpentry work on the ancient barn, and even, when necessary, shoeing our horses.

One of the things I did learn in Southfield during the six months or so I did my own printing there was that I had no particular interest